

# Lionel Shriver

BY JESSICA TEISCH

In 2009 Lionel Shriver wrote a column for the *Guardian*, describing her fear that her 330-pound older brother might kill himself from overeating. “My brother is only 55, and without drastic intervention—gastric bypass surgery or a sudden resolve on his part that I fear is unlikely—I doubt he’ll see 60. My brother is eating himself to death,” she wrote. Days later, her brother died from respiratory failure.

Shriver, an American-born journalist and novelist who lives in London but has spent time in Nairobi, Bangkok, Tel Aviv, and Belfast, dedicates her newest novel, *Big Brother* (reviewed on page 42), to her brother, “in the face of whose drastic, fantastic, astonishing life any fiction pales.” Yet, she told *Bookmarks*, “I deliberately avoided some of the political arguments circling obesity: the fat pride movement, the demonization of Big Food, controversies over fat taxes. This is a novel, and the place to address such issues would surely be in nonfiction. In general, the book focuses on the characters’ relationship to food, diet, and their own bodies, so it loosely puts what we eat and what we weigh in our own laps.”

As in *Big Brother*, Shriver’s topics are not for the faint-hearted: she has applied her storytelling skills to global terrorism (*The New Republic*, 2012), teenage violence (*We Need to Talk About Kevin*, 2003), and health care (*So Much for That*, 2010), among other controversial subjects. “True, my subject matter has been disparate,” she told *Bomb* magazine about her novels, now numbering a dozen. “In order: anthropology and first love, rock-and-roll drumming and immigration, the Northern Irish Troubles, demography and epidemiology, inheritance, tennis and spousal competition, terrorism and cults of personality ... high-school shootings and motherhood ... [and] the trade-offs of one man versus another and snooker. ... My characters all have something horribly wrong with them.” Mass murderers, mothers who hate their children, and egoistic athletes they may be. But through gripping, touching, and even funny stories about painful feelings and situations, Shriver humanizes terrible acts and pushes readers into places we’re generally afraid to go.

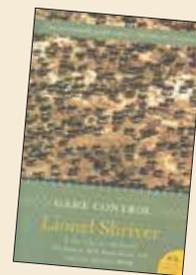
Born in 1957 in Gastonia, North Carolina, to a Presbyterian minister, Shriver subsequently embraced atheism and libertarianism, moved to Belfast and settled in London, and married jazz drummer Jeff Williams. She published

her first novel, *Female of the Species*, in 1986, but she still had what she describes as a “a long, unglorious stint in the literary trenches.” Publishing her first six novels in near obscurity, Shriver supplemented her fiction writing with a career as a journalist while conducting extensive research for her novels. “The best research gets me out of the house and talking to other people,” she told *Bookmarks*. “These days it’s dangerously easy to cull all your information online, and thus become a default agoraphobe. Yet however I derive it, from books, Google searches, or interviews, I always welcome an idea for a book that gives me an excuse to bone up on a new topic. My next novel, for example, has provided me reason to become better educated about economics, a subject I used to eschew as boring but which has in recent years grown entrancingly apocalyptic.” (Stay tuned.)

Although Shriver’s books are now amply talked about, it wasn’t until *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, about a high school massacre, that Shriver became well known, and her previous books—controversial, many of them receiving critical acclaim but little commercial success—were revived. After the success of that book and the publicity garnered by her following novels, one critic wrote, “Bring on the rest of the back catalogue—there’s plenty to choose from” (*Guardian*, 5/6/06). Here we present a few samples of Shriver’s work, including some of that back catalogue.

## Game Control (1994)

“I could have earned a master’s degree in demography for the amount of reading I did for that novel, and I moved to Nairobi for over a year to set the thing,” she told *Bomb* magazine in 2005. “And that book is the supreme example of my proclivity for perversity and wickedness.” Although it’s read as a satire, Shriver’s fourth novel—a wry, darkly comic social commentary on demography, epidemiology, population control (with AIDS thrown in for good measure), and hypocrisy of all kinds—reflects what Shriver calls her “misanthropic streak.” The novel came back into print in 2009, after the success of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*.





**THE STORY:** Eleanor Merritt, in her late 30s and childless, lives in Nairobi, wracked with guilt at the poverty around her. A do-gooder from America, she represents a family planning organization seeking to empower women. When she encounters an old flame, the doomsday-prophesying demographer Calvin Piper, at a population control conference, she falls back in love with the resolutely celibate misanthrope. Then Eleanor learns of his plan to control the world's population and save the planet by killing two billion people overnight. Surely, he tells her, if the poor are a responsibility, they are also a burden. But what will Eleanor do with this information? Can the human race be saved without sacrificing what ultimately makes us human?

**"Shriver has written a doggedly intellectual novel, more concerned with polemics than love in the tropics. ... *Game Control* is surprisingly gripping for a book that devotes many pages to debates on the future of the overpopulated planet; seldom [do] Eleanor and Calvin's diatribes seem like mere intellectual conference papers, owing to Shriver's undeniable talent as a writer and her ability to hint at what isn't being said."** JOHANNA LEGGATT, *SUN-HERALD* (SYDNEY), 11/9/08

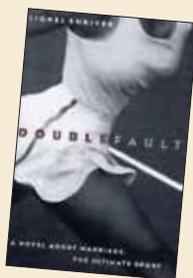
## Double Fault (1997)

*Double Fault*, also back in print after the success of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, tears apart the notion of marriage as a mutually beneficial partnership. Although not as dramatic, like *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, it dissects domestic issues. Through the sport of tennis, it explores competition, power, and, ultimately, human nature.

**THE STORY:** Wilhelmina (Willy) Novinsky has been a tennis ace since the age of four. Now 23, she has climbed to a ranking in the 400s. Then she meets Eric Oberdorf, a fiercely ambitious Princeton graduate with eyes on a tennis career, even though he didn't pick up a racket until he was 18. Their love and passion bloom over a game; the marriage proposal happens over a net. Yet though they plan a golden double tennis career, their marriage slowly unravels when Eric becomes a tennis prodigy and Willy suffers an injury and a subsequent loss of confidence. As Eric wins one international tournament after another, Willy's ranking slides—and she must determine her priorities in life.

**"This is not a novel about tennis or rivalry; it's about love, marriage and the balance of power in relationships. ... As we have come to expect from Shriver, there are no real winners. *Double Fault* is a compelling and playfully ironic take on the sex wars, blistering with the brilliant writing and caustic language that characterised *We Need to Talk About Kevin*."** VIV

GROSKOP, *GUARDIAN* (UK), 5/6/06



## We Need to Talk About Kevin (2003)

★★★★ Sept/Oct 2003

◆ ORANGE PRIZE

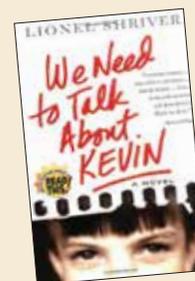
"By the time I wrote *Kevin*," Shriver said, "it was make-or-break. If I did not publish that book, I couldn't keep writing books" (*Elle* 4/23/13). In the wake of various massacres by school-age killers comes her seventh novel, set ten days before Columbine's tragic events of April 1999. It addresses parental responsibility, guilt, morality, nature versus nurture, and the complexities of child rearing.

Although 20 literary agents turned it down in the United States and 30 publishers initially turned it down in the United Kingdom, it became a literary sensation and a film starring Tilda Swinton.

**THE STORY:** After the 15-year-old Kevin massacres seven schoolmates, a cafeteria worker, and a teacher at his high school in upstate New York, he admits, "I knew exactly what I was doing. And I'd do it again." Why didn't his parents do something to stop him? In her fictional account of how one mother faces the consequences of her teenager's actions, Shriver produces no clear answers. She reveals Kevin's story through letters written by Eva Khatchadourian, Kevin's mother, to her estranged husband. Through her introspective correspondence, Eva imparts the details of her impulsive marriage, the birth of the "Machiavellian miscreant" Kevin, her own shortcomings as a mother, and her attempts to understand Kevin's vicious crime.

**"There are no answers here, no pat explanations. Shriver doesn't take an easy way out by blaming the parents. Instead, the novel holds a mirror up to a whole culture."** PATTI HARTIGAN,

*BOSTON GLOBE*, 7/15/03

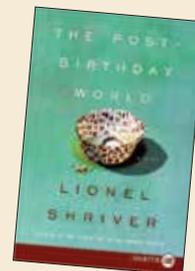


## The Post-Birthday World (2007)

★★★★ May/June 2007

Her first novel after *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Shriver's what-if story, following two alternative narratives, raises difficult questions about relationships and the possibilities—and regrets—in the decisions we make every day. She started writing it when she fell in love with the man who is now her husband, Jeff Williams, which meant leaving the man she had lived with for nearly a decade.

"My eighth novel is closer to my heart than to my head," Shriver told *Bookmarks*. "It's a parallel-universe book that looks at how one woman's life works out (imperfectly in both instances), depending on which man she lives with. The themes are timeless, and unlike many of my other novels, *The Post-Birthday World* isn't especially political, which can be refreshing."



**THE STORY:** Irina McGovern, an American children's book illustrator living in London, leads a predictable life with her longtime, predictable boyfriend, Lawrence. One night Irina suddenly finds herself alone with—and irresistibly attracted to—Ramsey Acton, a professional snooker player. Shriver explores what-if in a dual narrative that relates, in alternating chapters, the long-term consequences of each of Irina's choices. In one story line, Irina kisses Ramsey and rediscovers passion and pleasure while neglecting her health and career. In the other, she resists temptation and virtuously returns home to Lawrence, stability, and boredom. However, all is not quite as it seems.

**"Lionel Shriver's wonderful new novel ... creates parallel universes that indulge all our what-if speculations. ... Shriver is a crackerjack chronicler of the lives of the self-absorbed; she understands the ties that bind and the ones that sunder. ... Shriver is equally clever at shifting around polar opposites and mirror images."** MAMEVE MEDWED, *WASHINGTON POST*, 4/1/07

## So Much for That (2010)

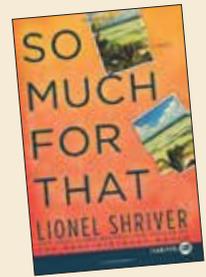
★★★★ May/June 2010

♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

Conceived before President Obama's administration, Shriver's ninth novel explores health care and the effect our policies have on middle-class Americans. It also raises the unsettling question about the worth, both financial

and emotional, of a human life. In her National Book Award interview, Shriver admitted pulling "off a novel taking on mortality and even a killjoy subject like American healthcare that's improbably funny, energetic, suspenseful, and *not*, I repeat *not*, depressing."

**THE STORY:** Shep Knacker can almost taste freedom. The New York handyman has saved more than \$700,000 for his retirement, and he plans to make the money last by living on the cheap on an island off the Tanzanian coast. Out of loyalty to a dream that predates his marriage, Shep is determined to realize what he calls "The Afterlife," even if his wife Glynis, a metalsmith, refuses to come along. But that dream is dashed when Glynis announces that she has terminal cancer and that she desperately needs Shep's health insurance. Now, instead of enjoying the good life, Shep stresses over skyrocketing medical bills, a rapidly dwindling savings account, and the very real possibility of bankruptcy.



**"It's clearer here than ever before that Shriver has a merciless streak, a tendency to flail her characters and her readers' sensibilities. ... If you can take the story's grisly details and Shriver's badgering insight into all things, this is the rare novel that will shake and change you."** RON CHARLES, *WASHINGTON*

*POST*, 3/17/10 ■

## A Few Questions for Lionel Shriver

**BM: How did you do the research for *Big Brother*?**

LS: Having eaten my whole life helped. Having dabbled in fasting in my 20s (when younger I was fascinated with control; now I haven't the faintest interest in testing my capacity to starve, which is far more boring to me lately than economics) helped to inform the all-liquid diet section of the novel. I also interviewed a good friend who has done the Cambridge diet more than once, to considerable effect. But this wasn't a research-heavy project. Setting the novel in Iowa was a pleasure, since my younger brother lives there. Visiting him while the manuscript was underway meant paying attention to a state I had previously taken for granted. I was happy to discover that I really love it. The skies, all that corn—the landscape is incredibly moving. The people are decent, open, and convivial, and finally I understood in a deep sense why my brother put down roots there.

**BM: Is there policy or public perception you hope to influence with *Big Brother*?**

LS: I deliberately avoided some of the political arguments circling obesity: the fat pride movement, the demonization of Big Food, controversies over fat taxes. This is a novel, and the place to address such issues would surely be in

nonfiction. In general, though, the book focuses on the characters' relationship to food, diet, and their own bodies, so it loosely puts what we eat and what we weigh in our own laps. I suppose I resist approaches to obesity that place responsibility for the nation's weight gain on outside forces, if only because blaming other actors doesn't seem to lead to a solution. Quite to the contrary. As a journalist, too, I resist direct government intervention in such a personal aspect of our lives. I don't want the Feds butting their noses into my refrigerator or controlling what I may or may not place in my cart at the supermarket.

**BM: We always like to hear what our authors are reading. Do you have recent favorites?**

LS: This sure doesn't make me special, since the novel is firmly ensconced on the best seller list, but I just finished Phillip Meyer's *The Son*, which I reviewed for the *FT*. To jump shamelessly on the bandwagon, I relished it, as I also relished his first novel, *American Rust*. I'm nearly finished with Maria McCann's third historical novel *Ace, King, Knave*, which has gradually gained momentum until I'd have to call it a page-turner. I'd also commend *Visitation Street* by Ivy Pochoda—a remarkably assured first novel set in Redhook, Brooklyn. The neighborhood is beautifully captured, the premise is original, and the characters are both full and surprising. Last, I recently dispatched John Lanchester's hugely entertaining *Capital*, which is especially entrancing for readers familiar with London. ■